

News & Notes

The Oriental Institute

Issued confidentially to members and friends

No. 43: April, 1978

Not for publication

YOU ARE INVITED!

COME SEE WHAT WE DO!

Please keep your calendar free
for our Open House

MEMBER'S DAY

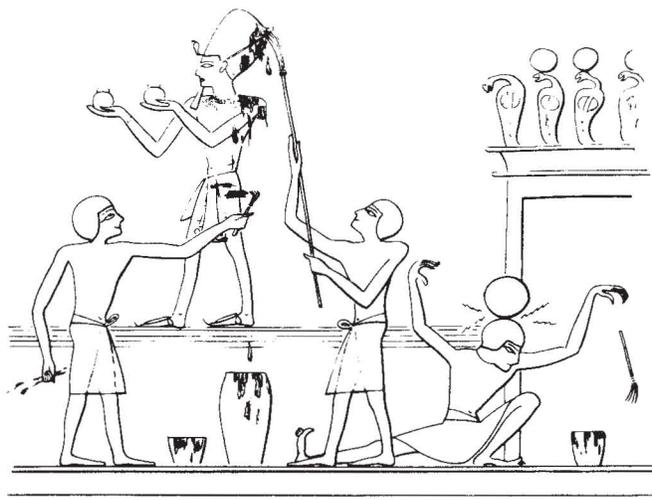
Sunday, May 7, 1978 1:00-4:00 P.M.

R.S.V.P. 753-2389

The Offices and Workrooms
of the Oriental Institute
1155 East 58th Street

Admission is free. Museum Halls and The Suq
will be open as usual.

(The Quadrangle Club is closed on Sundays.)



THE EBLA TABLETS — AN INTERIM PERSPECTIVE

by Robert D. Biggs,
Professor of Assyriology

IN A TIME THAT IS ALREADY EXCITING for Near Eastern archeology, the identification of the famous city of Ebla, near Aleppo in Syria, has provoked particular interest. Most stunning of all was the discovery of some 16,000 cuneiform tablets—a fantastic find by anyone's standards.

Usually, archeological discoveries are reported in scholarly journals and in specialized monographs and books. Ebla became an exception and was widely reported in newspapers and mass circulation magazines, so much so that vast numbers of people have

heard *something* about Ebla. Part of the widespread interest in Ebla was the result of reports of connections with the Bible, particularly because of names similar to those of the Old Testament Patriarchs and the analysis of its previously unknown Semitic language as a close relative of Biblical Hebrew. Especially in some Fundamentalist religious circles, these reports were seized on as a proof positive of the historicity of the Patriarchs and even of the accuracy of the biblical account of creation.

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Archeologists and Assyriologists were more concerned with the reports that indicated a totally revised chronology and history of the Near East in the third millennium B.C. We were shocked to hear that Ebla, and not the Dynasty of Akkad in Mesopotamia, was the dominant force in the area and that Akkad had even become subject to Ebla, having at one time to pay tribute. This was hardly our image of Sargon of Akkad!

These initial reports are now a couple of years behind us. Where do we stand now that the tablets have been studied a bit more? Are the tablets going to revolutionize our understanding of the Bible? Is our chronology all wrong?

The tablets are indeed a most extraordinary find. As the excavators, Paolo Matthiae and Giovanni Pettinato of the University of Rome, have stated in their preliminary reports, they are mostly written in Sumerian, although some are in a previously unknown Semitic language. About 80 percent are administrative documents dealing with palace personnel and agriculture; a considerable number deal with foreign trade, mostly in textiles and metals. The next largest group consists of lexical texts, the long lists of Sumerian words for kinds of fishes, birds, pots, plants, and the like. In this group are bilingual vocabularies giving Sumerian words and translations into Eblaite, the newly discovered Semitic language. The political archives—edicts, letters to officials, and treaties, are a further group. These mention Mari and a good many familiar names in Syria and northern Mesopotamia. So far they have found no mention of Egypt in the tablets. The last category is literary texts. It has been reported that there is both a flood story and a creation story. Whether these identifications will survive close study of the texts remains to be seen.

The closest parallels for the Ebla tablets are the tablets from Abu Salabikh (near Nippur in Iraq),

excavated by the Oriental Institute in the 1960's, which I published several years ago. They tie Ebla to the Mesopotamian scribal tradition. In addition, it is clear that there are real cultural connections between Ebla and Abu Salabikh, including use of the same calendar. The chronological difference between the Ebla and Abu Salabikh tablets is still much debated, but probably the Ebla tablets are only several generations later if not in fact contemporary.

The new Semitic language has raised a great deal of interest, especially because of Pettinato's conclusion that it is more closely related to Biblical Hebrew than any other Semitic language. In fact, he calls it Old Canaanite. He has not gone unchallenged. Professor I. J. Gelb of the Oriental Institute, who is widely known as a specialist in early Semitic languages, has published a study in which he concludes that the language is more closely related to Akkadian and Amorite than to Hebrew. He points out as well that the personal names from the texts which were first compared to names of the Patriarchs also occur in other early Semitic languages.

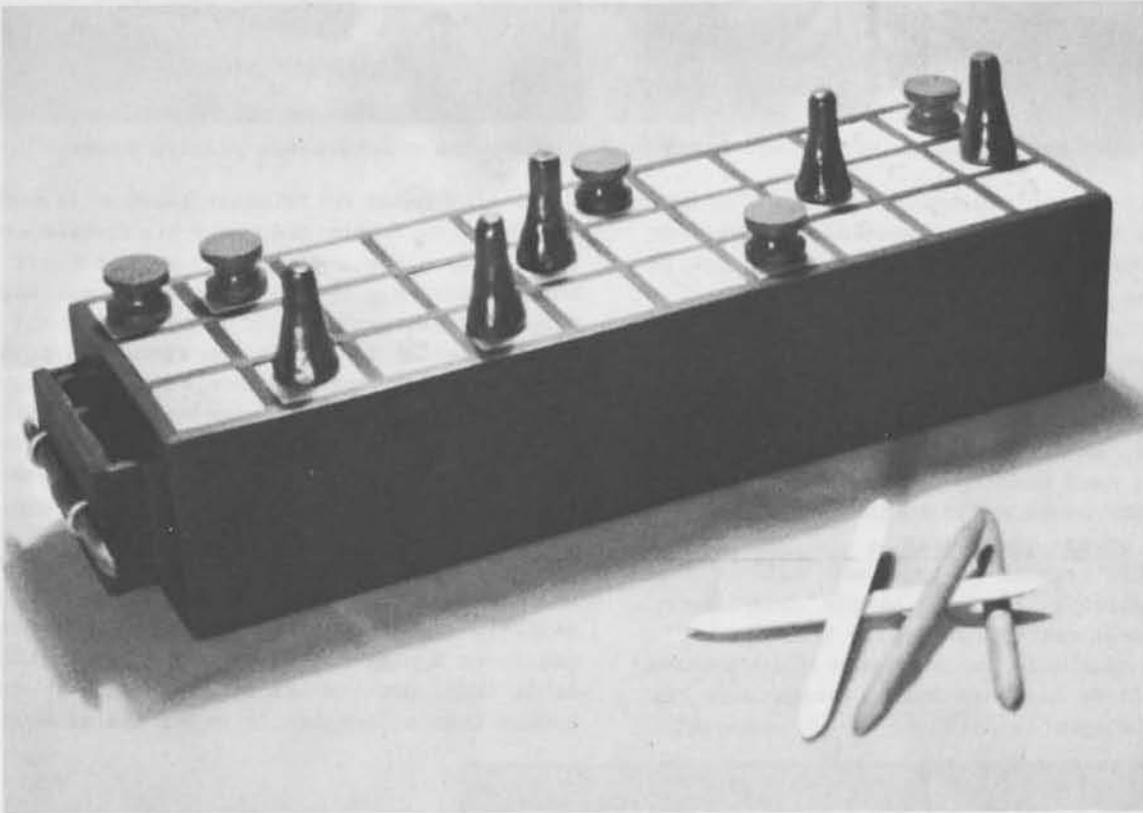
With practically none of the tablets published and with very little of the archeological data available that would help to settle the chronological problems, we are still somewhat in the dark. Enough is clear now, however, to update some of the preliminary conclusions. The excavators themselves have revised a number of their earlier statements, but the first ones made much more exciting newspaper copy!

First, they are denying that the Ebla tablets have any special relevance for the Old Testament, calling such statements "pseudo-scientific mystifications." Their most startling chronological revision has evaporated. It turns out that the reported mention of Sargon of Akkad in a tribute list was based on a mistaken reading of sev-

eral cuneiform signs, and, in fact, Akkad is not mentioned in the Ebla texts at all.

The Ebla tablets will be a major source for study of the Near East in the third millennium B.C., throwing light on international relations and on trade. Some of the tablets should help us to better understand the Sumerian literary texts of

the third millennium. The new and unsuspected Semitic language and the copious documentation of it are major discoveries. The Ebla tablets will be of supreme importance for our understanding of the Near East in the third millennium, but those who expect new light on the Old Testament will surely be disappointed.



KING TUT'S GAME

by Jean Luther

Managing Editor, Oriental Institute Publications

PETER PICCIONE, a 26-year-old graduate student in Egyptology at the Oriental Institute, has uncovered the rules of an ancient Egyptian board game that has not been played properly in over 2,000 years. The game, called *Senet*, was a favorite diversion of King Tutankhamun. It took Piccione a year to piece together the rules, and now the Cadaco Game Company has begun marketing *Senet* under the name *King Tut's Game*.

Piccione worked with ancient texts, descriptions and photographs of *Senet* games from museums around the world, and tomb paintings of *Senet* matches. He began his research last March while he was reading ancient religious texts. "Scholars

had pointed out that there were similarities between some elements in these texts and the game of *Senet*—the idea of traveling, for instance—but no one had tried to figure out the relationship," Piccione says.

Working at first with a fellow student, Edward Ashment, then continuing on his own, Piccione began to study closely two religious texts, "The Book of Gates" and "The Book of What is in the Netherworld," both of which describe the afterlife as a journey by water. He also used three fragmentary copies of an obscure text that describes the afterlife as a game of *Senet*. "We realized that the material in this game text was related to events de-



KING TUT'S GAME and facsimile of ancient board

picted in the other two books," he says. "By interpreting the three texts, I was able to discover both the object of the game and the sequence in which it was played."

Final interpretation of all the texts and surviving games revealed that the player's object was to get his soul safely through the underworld to join with Ra, the sun god, in the afterlife. The gameboard is the underworld, i.e., the nighttime land of the dead beneath the earth, and the hieroglyphs on the board refer to the deities and to the forces of the underworld.

The modern version of the game, made of cardboard and plastic, is based on the ebony, ivory, and gold *Senet* set found in King Tutankhamun's tomb. The gameboard has three rows of 10 squares each. Piccione has been able to reconstruct the hieroglyphic symbols on 21 of the 30 squares.



Egyptian wall painting from the tomb of Nebemmaat, Theban Tomb no. 219 (1200 B.C.). Nebemmaat, on the left, plays Senet with his wife, Meretseger, while his daughter stands behind him.



Casting the sticks while playing Senet.

To play *Senet* (which means "passing" in ancient Egyptian), the player had to get his five pieces onto the board, along the three rows, and off the board before his opponent could do so. Ancient Egyptians cast sticks (or the knucklebones of small animals) to decide the number of squares they could move, but Piccione's game comes equipped with numbered cubes, because the toy company felt that sticks might be too unfamiliar as playing pieces today. However, it is expected that a more elaborate version of the game, to come out later, will include the sticks.

The play in *King Tut's Game* usually lasts about an hour. Gods and other supernatural beings, depicted on various squares in the three rows, can force a player to lose a turn, give him an extra turn, provide him with a chance to roll a number that allows him to enter the afterlife,

or subject him to such hazards as drowning in the Waters of Chaos. If a game piece lands in the Waters of Chaos it must go off the board and start again. Throughout, the players are busy blocking each other or forcing each other onto squares that impede progress.

The final square of the game shows the sun god, Ra, in the shape of a falcon, indicating that at the end of the journey through the netherworld, the soul of the player joins the sun god in the sky.

Ancient Egyptians, from pharaohs to farmers, played *Senet* for fun, but some were aware of the religious significance of the game and may even

have played it as a ritual of some kind.

Piccione has known of the game since he began his Egyptology studies at the Oriental Institute.

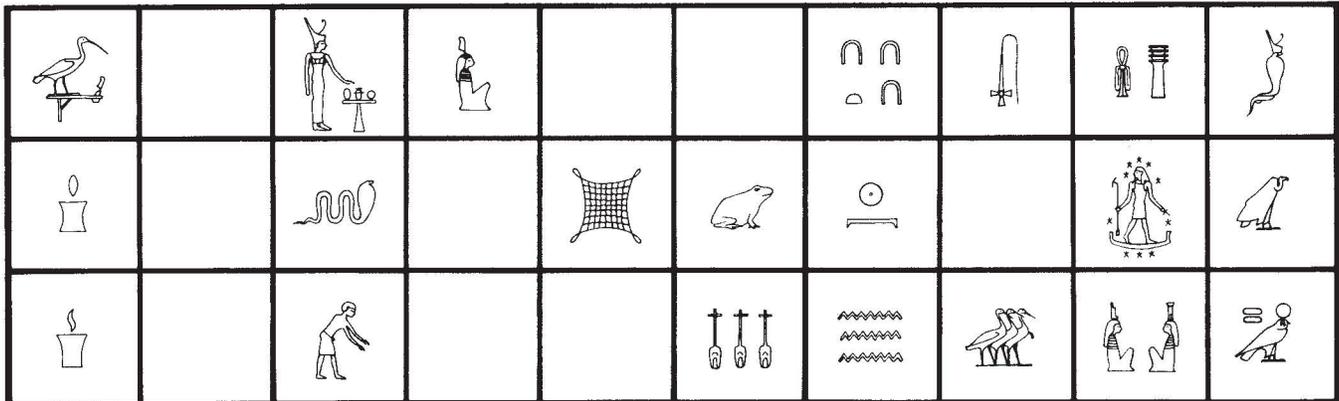
"The game is like backgammon, but it has its own special twists," he says. "To engage in this game in one's lifetime is to ensure the immortality of one's soul." Like most people everywhere, the Egyptians were aware that what is physically evident is not necessarily all that exists. To play *King Tut's Game*, then, is not only to amuse oneself but also to confront, perhaps not as seriously as the Egyptians, the fact of one's own mortality.

Peter Piccione is the editor of The Oriental Institute News and Notes.

SENET BOARD RECONSTRUCTION AND THE NAMES OF THE SQUARES

1

10



21

30

Numbering: top row - left to right; middle row - right to left; bottom row - left to right.

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Thoth | 14. The Aton | 26. Goodness (one free throw) |
| 3. Neith | 15. House of Repeating Life
(one free throw) | 27. The Waters of Chaos
(start over) |
| 4. Ma'at | 16. House of Netting
(lose one turn) | 28. The Heliopolitan Souls
(roll three to enter
the afterlife) |
| 7. House of the Thirty | 18. Tenet-Mehnet | 29. Isis and Nephthys
(roll two to enter the
afterlife) |
| 8. House of Fire | 20. House of Bread | 30. Re-Horakhty, the sun god
(roll one to enter the
afterlife) |
| 9. Tie-knot and Djed Pillar | 21. House of Incense | |
| 10. Wadjyt | 23. House of Libation | |
| 11. Mut | | |
| 12. Orion | | |

IRAN TOUR 1979

Teheran-Shiraz-Persepolis-Isfahan

October 22-November 6. For further information write to the Membership Secretary, The Oriental Institute.

The Oriental Institute cordially invites you to attend a lecture:

MUMMIES AND MAGIC: AN INTRODUCTION TO ANCIENT EGYPTIAN
FUNERARY BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

by Lanny D. Bell

Director, Chicago House

Monday, May 22

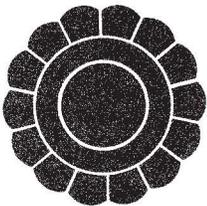
8:00 P.M.

Breasted Hall

1155 E. 58th Street

(The Quadrangle Club, 1155 East 57th Street, will be open to Oriental Institute members who wish to make dinner reservations. Please call Mrs. Schlender, 493-8601. Please remember that the privilege of the use of the dining room at the Quadrangle Club is a courtesy extended to members of the Oriental Institute only on nights when there is an Oriental Institute lecture.)

MEMBERS NOTE: The Suq, the Oriental Institute Museum gift shop, has scheduled a special sale of jewelry, wall hangings, posters, etc. to begin on Member's Day. This is to ensure that members will be the first to profit from the sale prices.
KING TUT'S GAME is now available for purchase from the Suq. Please remember that members receive a 10% discount on the purchase of any item there.



The Oriental Institute

The University of Chicago

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